



SB 2140

House Education Committee

March 8, 2021 – 3:30 P.M. – Coteau AB Room

Good Afternoon Mr. Chairman and members of the House Education Committee. My name is Nancy Kopp, Executive Director of the North Dakota Optometric Association. I appear before you in a neutral position of amended SB 2140.

The NDOA did support the repeal of Section 15-10-43.1 and the Repayment Waiver in Section 15-10-42.2, however SB 2140 in its original form failed to pass the Senate. The bill was reconsidered and amended to include a study.

The NDOA stands in opposition to line 24 of the study language, which we strongly believe that the PSEP was created to provide access and tuition assistance for students in all three professions and any repayment provision should be applied equally. All three professions and the services provided for human and animal health are essential to the citizens of North Dakota and have for years, invested in professional students to realize their chosen careers to serve others.

I have personally and professionally been involved in the debate of this issue of PSEP Repayment provisions (come back or payback) for each and every session since 1999, including a couple of interim studies or committee discussions, to no resolve.

The following, is the NDOA testimony I provided the Senate Education Committee on January 20, 2021, which I will not read, but provide for your information:

“I would like to simply provide you with a background, averages for tuition and student debt, practice modalities and demographics for the practice of optometry in North Dakota, for your consideration, as follows:

NDOA represents 159 of the 178 licensed optometrists that reside and practice in North Dakota. 75% of NDOA members own or are employed in private practice and 25% are employed by a hospital or physician. 20% provide primary eye care and vision services at a satellite clinic 2-3 days per week, traveling up to 125 miles from their primary practice. 77% practice in an urban area and 23% practice in a rural community. 55% are male and 45% are female.

The average student loan upon graduation for optometrists, to my knowledge is \$200,000.00-\$250,000.00 The average tuition rate at Pacific School of Optometry, the school most North Dakota residents attend, is \$43,000.00 and the national average earning potential is reported at \$123,000.00. Again, national average and may vary from state to state, depending on economic conditions.

The Professional Student Exchange Program has for many years, provided tuition subsidies for North Dakota students that attend out-of-state professional schools in Optometry, Dentistry and Veterinary Medicine; schools that North Dakota does not provide the infrastructure or programs for.

According to the University System Proposed Budget allocations for, in past years, PSEP provides approximately 45% funding for Veterinary Medicine, 30% for Dentistry and 25% for Optometry. I’m assuming that the number of slots appropriated, are based on projections of future professional student applications and future workforce needs that may satisfy consumer access to healthcare issues. There is no question that the PSEP has been a true incentive for North Dakota students to consider optometry as a career.

On another note, that your committee may want to take into consideration and solely for your information, the profession of optometry is not included in the ND Health Council’s Loan Repayment Program, as Dentists and Veterinarians are, that

further provides many professions, funds to reduce educational loan forgiveness, who agree to serve the underserved, primarily rural areas over a 2-4 year period; approximately \$60,000.00-\$80,000.00 per recipient. The NDOA is not advocating, at this time, for inclusion in the Health Council's Loan Repayment or Loan Forgiveness, however do see a need in the future, as 3 optometric practices in rural North Dakota have simply closed their doors, upon retirement, as they were unable to recruit an optometrist to maintain the practice and serve the local residents with their eye and vision care.

In closing, I would like to assure you that the NDOA does work hard to maintain a communication and education channel with all PSEP recipients, throughout their 4 years of professional doctoral degree education program, provided out-of-state and encourage them to return to North Dakota to practice their chosen profession, upon graduation. The earning potential is what one sets their "sight on"!

While supporting the repeal of the repayment provision, the NDOA firmly believes that the program originally was designed to apply to all three professions and feel that it is important that any changes be applied equally to the professions. Uniformity is critical.

I would be happy to answer any questions you may have, or obtain additional information upon request. Thank you in advance for your considerations."

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